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ABSTRACT

Librarians store, protect, and provide the knowledge our modern society needs, but it is frequently difficult to justify the services a reference librarian provides. The work load of a reference librarian varies greatly with periods of frantic activity separated by much longer inactive periods. The role is principally passive, waiting for library patrons to ask questions. The questions are usually directional or professional. One could justify a reference librarian's services by trying to measure how much his professional services save the patron's time and money. Experiments measuring the difference between searching library resources with and without the services of a reference librarian might be a logical start in evaluating the worth of reference librarian services. The job of reference librarian is important, but sometimes it is vital to justify it to others. (WH)

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WHY WASTE PROFESSIONAL TIME ON DIRECTIONAL QUESTIONS?

by

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I would like to briefly discuss some thoughts concerning the philosophical and practical needs of reference service and then suggest some techniques for measuring reference service.

Reference librarians have a need to justify the service they provide. We need to feel that what we do is usful beyond just providing a living. I believe, along with Johann Goethe, that neither learning, lust, nor pleasure can satisfy a person whose happiness consists in leading a useful life.

Do librarians lead a useful life?

One person relying on his own experience and learning of the experiences of others only through oral communication can store a lot of knowledge in his mind, as in a stone-age culture. However, if many people record and store their knowledge so others can use it at a different time and place the knowledge available to any one person is mind blowing. That is where we are in our highly technological and post-industrial society. Finding out how somebody in a distant city keeps the sewers flowing or how they handle solid wastes; knowing what a writer or philosopher said about a personal problem similar to one's own; getting

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the address of an agency to seek some help; obtaining facts to make a point with city council; finding out how to tune your car; finding out where metallic nodules have been found on the ocean floors; or how to grow tomatoes in a window box; you name it, this is the knowledge stored in a library. Man's mistakes are also preserved but because of this he has a better chance to recognize them and not repeat them.

If knowledge is power, that is, if knowledge can be used to change behavior, then access to knowldege is very important, not only in a technological society but especially if democratic ideals are to be maintained. James Madison said, "a people who mean to be their own governors must arm themselves with the power knowledge gives". Many of us still have faith that the more knowledge one has the wiser decisions one can make.(1).

Librarians are the guardians of man's accumulated knowledge which is most conveniently used as it is stored on printed pages. Access to the knowledge is thru a file of information in an index or catalog. Computers can search large files much more efficiently than man can but librarians are supposed to manage the retrieval system whether it's thumbing cards, flipping pages, or poking keys at a terminal to elicit instant bibliographies or facts from distant computers.

This knowledge makes me feel that reference service is a most useful occupation in our complex technological society and the same knowledge can perhaps convince library directors and providers of funds that reference service deserves their support.

However, most higher authorities want hard facts on how much work you do to earn your pay.

A reference librarian is paid to stand by and to be available for expert assistance in extracting information from the library and thereby, the assumption is, save the patron a considerable amouunt of time. If someone could put figures on the amount of time saved he would become the saint of reference departments.

In large impersonal institutions another important, but overlooked role fo the reference librarian can be that of reducing frustrations: for instance, a patron can take his problem to the reference librarian, have an attentive listener, and get an immediate, constructive, and personal response. This is in marked contrast to his dealings with many other public offices (this is not the case, of course, where the librarian is a snob).

Work load at a reference desk, like that at a supermarket checkstand, is boom or bust. At times the librarian may be so busy he is unable to sit down for an hour and at other times he will have only four or five questions in an hour.

One study (2) in a university library determined that out of an average hour the librarian spent 6 minutes providing professional reference service, 7 minutes giving directions or looking up addresses, and 47 minutes waiting for the next patron. The data were gathered over a 7 month period and included times when two librarians were swamped.

The librarian can accomplish some busy work between questions. He may, in one slow hour, respond to only five questions but he will be distracted from his work perhaps 10 to 15 times by an approaching patron who either chickened out or was just passing by. This is an interruption on the average of every 3 to 4 minutes and not at all conducive to creative or professional endeavors.

This tends to create the feeling that one's job is not all that useful if so much time is spent waiting and then when a patron does ask a question the chances are only about 1 in 6 that it would require a professional to answer it.

The time-saving and frustration-reducing functions are important, maybe the directional question will lead to a more substantial encounter. The question is do you or does your boss or his boss think all that standby time is worth it? (Don't assume you have as much standby time as I report--you will have to determine your own workload distribution).

One partial solution might be to reduce this passive reference service and replace it with active service, that is, the reference librarian would spend more time out of the library with groups of patrons -- at city council meetings, hearings, community agencies, with citizens groups, in classrooms, seminars, lecture halls -- determining their information needs and assisting them in satisfying those needs. But this is not the topic for today and if it were administrators would want it measured.

In order to satisfy the need for a measure of reference it is common practice to report the number of contacts at the reference desk, usually broken down into several categories. However, this does not account for the standby time. Another approach which also ignores but might help justify standby time would be to report the amount of time the reference librarian saved the patron, if we could figure out how to measure it so others would believe it.

It would be very difficult or impossible to determine how much time a reference librarian saves a patron on each question as it is asked. It would be possible to generalize and come up with average time saved for various categories of questions for particular libraries.

I would like to describe three ways to attempt to measure the amount of time it takes patrons to find information in a library.

The first assumption we might make is that saving the parton's time is our objective. The second assumption is that by asking for assistance most patrons will save himself time. It will take objective measurements to confirm or disprove this second assumption.

The first technique, which has been suggested in the literature but I have never seen results of an actual study, is to set up an experiment and measure the difference in average time it takes a patron to find the information he seeks with and without the aid of a reference librarian.

The first step is to compile a list of real reference questions and categorize them into several groups like 1) directional, 2) quick reference, 3) reference collection, 4)main card catalog or main stack types, or into any other logical grouping from easy to complicated.

The second step is to find a group of willing patrons who have had no library training. Divide them into two groups, give them the questions, ask them not to collaborate, and instruct them how to time themselves. Have one group try to find the answers without any assistance and the other group go to the reference librarian for help with each question. Compare average times. You might repeat the experiment with a group of experienced library users.

In order to be believable you would need the assistance of an experienced social surveyor/statistician using acceptable methods of sampling and statistical analysis. The procedures could get more complicated if it is decided the librarian is a significant variable.

Once the average time saved per category of question is determined then you can maintain the count of questions answered as most of us do now but in the reports to management you can include how much time you have saved patrons. You can even convert the time into dollars by assuming what the patrons' time is worth. You can then compare this with the cost of providing the service. (One study (3) showed that 2 hours of librarians time saved 2 days of researcher's time when librarians provided on-line bibliographie These types of data can justify reference service.).

It would probably be a good idea to repeat the test every year or two.

A second technique which is a modification of the first would be to compile the list of questions then assume the role of the patron, that is, play it straight and time yourself. One time without asking for assistance and one time asking your colleagues. Or one person could play all three roles. The results of this method would not be as believable as those from actual patrons.

A third technique would be to observe patrons entering the reference room and time them until they open a reference book noting whether or not they ask for assistance. With this technique we would not necessarily know if the patron's needs were satisfied but with a large enough sample you might get some indication of the value of reference assistance.

There is another test one can give the reference department: this is determining the ease with which a patron can find items without having to ask directional questions.

First, you assume the role of a patron who knows the title of a reference book, then determine all the steps the patron must take to find that book in your reference room. It is best to flow chart the process with yes and no decisions so you get down to the basics of locating a book. I tried this in a major library and found the self-help directions in need of repair: like no map of the reference room at the reference card catalog; ambiguous instructions; and inconsistent labeling of sections of the reference collection. If you find bottlenecks then you can take steps to reduce them. You can even time the steps before and after and determine the value of your improvements.

If you do a really good job of this and make the self-help directions so efficient then the directional question statistics will drop and you'll be in trouble. Maybe we should make libraries so confusing to use that people will be demanding more reference help. If this happens it won't be librarians but library assistants that will be hired.

In summary: Man's store of knowledge has become part of the commons. The physical commons - air, water, and soil are shared by all people, life depends on an abundance of clean air, water, and soil. You inhale the air, and whatever, I exhale, the water we drink has been used by somebody else (if you are extremely lucky it has been distilled).

In a technological society, too complicated for oral transmittal to contemporaries and to future generations, the store of knowldege and access to it has become another indispensable element of the commons - belonging to and used by all, especially in a technology-dependent democracy.

Librarians are the guardians and providers of access to man's store of knowledge and play a vital role in our society. These arguments can justify reference service but we are asked to provide facts and figures. I have suggested methods for determining the time a patron saves by having a personal guide to the store of knowledge.

While we reference librarians are dickering about how to tell people where the bathroom is computer terminals are being used in private offices to elicit instant bibliographies, companies are establishing bibliographic searching and document delivery services, and media centers (which are stores of knowledge) are being set up outside the jurisdiction of libraries.

So if we have to do some studies for some facts to justify our jobs, then let's do it, make our point, and get on with being the foremost guides to recorded human knowledge.

2.2. Jestes, E.C. and Laird, W.D., "A time study of general reference work in a university library," Research in Librarianship, v.2, Jan. 1968, 9-16.

3.2. Jestes, E.C., "CAIN on-line project report for the period October - December, 1973," University Library, University of California, Davis, June 1974, 22pp.

1. Muscatine, C., "The future of university education as an idea", in: Ong, W.J., editor, Knowledge and the future of man, Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968, pp.39-54.